

Foreword by
Luke Martell

In 2008 a global financial crisis, originating in local problems in the American sub-prime mortgage market spread across the world, leaving banks and businesses or even whole economies collapsing and workers thrown into unemployment in their millions.

A new US President was elected. Barack Obama acted with urgency to tackle the economic crisis he inherited. He pushed the issue of climate change to the top of the political agenda, where previously even its scientific basis had been questioned. Obama moved to a new multilateral soft power approach to tackling antagonistic international relations and threats from overseas.

If risk and interdependency were not at the forefront of the minds of academics, politicians and business people, let alone the wider public, it was difficult to avoid them after such events. Global financial crisis and climate change and its effects, as far as desertification and resource wars in Africa, have brought to our attention the importance of risk, environmental problems, global interdependency and the localised causes and impacts of such phenomena.

There is not now a major institution that does not have to develop risk assessments of its actions and policies. Some insular people in the rich world avoid learning about the realities of climate change but the evidence is readily available for anyone who makes the effort to look – carbon emissions produced in rich countries, desertifying agricultural land and drying up water sources in poor countries thousands of miles away, and wars being fought in already poverty-stricken countries over the dwindling resources left over. One such resource war in Sudan has left hundreds of thousands dead, although well-educated people in developed countries choose not to find out about this or to change their behaviour to reduce their carbon emissions behind such problems.

Greg Borne's book on sustainable development and the reflexive government of risk addresses some of the big themes facing the world – the need for sustainable development, consciousness of risk, the development of reflexive modernity and the political levels at which such issues can be articulated and tackled. These themes have often been discussed separately or, in some cases, at an abstract and theoretical level with insufficient attention to empirical evidence or a critical investigation of their reality.

Borne tackles these deficiencies by bringing together such concerns, categorising them in a sophisticated and fluent way with conceptual clarity, and subjecting them to empirical investigation. Borne also brings global and local relations together. His concern is, admirably, to test such theses rather than just be seduced by theoretical elegance (the criterion for some academics for how good a theory is), and to see where the politics most appropriate for solving them are best located.

A key theme in globalisation studies is the interconnections and relations between global and local levels, especially given the alleged decline of the middle level of the nation-state. At the same time anti-globalisation movements have raised the issue of whether the best way to tackle problems such as development, human rights, war, and climate change is through mainstream politics or more informal bottom-up politics and the local and decentralised levels of civil society.

For theorists of reflexive modernity the nation-state is being undermined by globalisation, and politics is being reconstructed at the lower down civil society level of life and sub-politics and higher up in global governance. Borne focuses his attention on risk consciousness and perceptions of sustainable development at both of these levels. His book is a study of global politics at the United Nations and the degree of sustainable development perceptions there, alongside an examination of local activism to pursue carbon reductions and ensure sustainable consumption.

Radical environmentalists may expect to find such a study revealing intransigence and conservatism at the global level and more environmental consciousness of risk and sustainability locally. One of the great merits of good empirical research in the social sciences is that it sometimes challenges plausible theories and what we expect to find.

Borne finds a dichotomy between risk perception at global and local levels. At the global level in the UN processes he observed directly there is a sense of collective risk, for instance about climate change and development and his findings here support the reflexive modernisation thesis.

At local level consciousness of sustainable development was more divorced from collective global risks. Here Borne finds that everyday life takes precedence over the global. There may even be counter-reflexivity in this sphere.

Counter-intuitive to what some greens may expect, the global level seems to be the most sensitive to environmental risk. The local alternative network seems to be more restricted to its local concerns.

Borne has tried to bring together sustainable development and reflexive modernity, and theories and empirical evidence at both global and local levels. His findings raise questions about how generalised risk consciousness and reflexive modernity really are. There appears to be a mismatch between global sustainable development governance and consciousness at the local level.

How should we respond to this politically? One conclusion from Borne's findings could be that global governance should be the focus of sustainable development. This is where reflexive modernity seems to be operating. But conflicting interests and power relations here raise questions about whether this can work. Will states who have power and are not the main losers from climate change take sufficient steps and be willing to sacrifice their own interests enough to help the poorer and most affected parts of the world?

At the same time, nation-states participate in global governance and have power of their own. This leaves open a role for the nation-state in between the global and local.

Or Borne's findings may imply that global governance where reflexive consciousness and sustainable development seem to operate has to do more to overcome the mismatch between its level and that of the local – it has to do more to incorporate the local and bring it into the sphere of reflexive risk consciousness.

Borne's findings raise such political questions. This is an interesting book that makes you think. It is well written and regularly ties up its themes well. It is empirically informative and very good on creating categories and concepts for encapsulating its findings. Borne proceeds in a methodologically careful way. He overturns what to some would be obvious truths and invites the reader to think about where politics may be most reflexive and best able to deal with environmental problems.